

Postoperative Instructions for Mastectomy

Thank you for choosing the General Surgery Department at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center (VAMC) for your operation. We hope that we have met your needs and have served you in a courteous, caring, and efficient manner. You are the most important factor in your recovery. Please follow these instructions carefully.

Dressings

Keep the dressing and the area where your drain exits your body clean and dry. Your dressing will be covered with an ace wrap. Your affected arm will be placed in a sling. Your surgeon will remove your dressing, drain, and sling in the Postoperative Clinic after 10-11 days. Keep dressing and the area where your drain exits your skin dry. You may have either steri-strips or staples on your incision. ***Do not remove the steri-strips.***

Steri-Strips

Steri-strips are small pieces of tape that help keep your incision closed. Once you can shower, the steri-strips will loosen in about 5 days. When they start to loosen, remove them carefully.

Staples

If you go home with staples, your doctor will tell you when they can be removed. This can be done at the VAMC or by a private doctor, or a public health nurse. If your staples are still in after 11 days, call the Minneapolis VAMC at one of the phone numbers at the end of this handout.

Drains

You will have at least one drain in place after your surgery. The drain helps to remove the fluid from your surgical site and prevents discomfort and infection.

To care for your drains:

- Wash your hands before and after you empty the drainage reservoir.
- Empty the reservoir before it gets full.
- Measure and record the amount of drainage. Use the plastic cup you were given to measure the drainage. Throw the drainage away after you measure it. Bring a record of the amount to your follow-up appointment.

Showering and Bathing

Take a sponge bath until your dressing is removed. You may shower after the dressing and your drains are removed. This will be in about 10-11 days. Let the water run over your incision and gently pat dry. Do not rub or scrub your incision. If your incision has any openings, do not shower unless your doctor says you can.

Do not take a tub bath or soak your incision until your staples and drains are removed.

Do not use lotions or powders on your incision until your staples and drains are removed.

Activity

You may feel tired for the first few months after your surgery. Rest when you feel tired. You may begin walking short distances a few days after your surgery. Gradually increase the distance or time you walk.

Do not drive for 2 weeks after surgery.

Do not lift anything over 10 pounds for 2 weeks after surgery.

Keep your arm raised above the level of the heart as much as possible after surgery. This helps prevent arm swelling and helps drain the fluid.

Referral to Occupational Therapy

Your surgeon will refer you to Occupational Therapy. There you will learn how to exercise your upper body after surgery. Exercise will help restore flexibility and strength to your upper body. It also helps to improve drainage of fluids from your upper arm.

Lymphedema

Because lymph nodes under your arm were removed, your arm may swell. Your lymph system and nodes help to filter fluids from the upper part of your breast, neck, and underarms. Removing these nodes can disrupt the drainage and filtering of your lymph system on the side where your breast was removed.

The collection of too much fluid in the arm is called lymphedema. There are two types of lymphedema:

- Acute, temporary lymphedema may occur within a few days after surgery and lasts a short time. A variant of the acute type is more painful and usually occurs 4-6 weeks after surgery.
- The most common type is often painless and occurs slowly, 18-24 months after surgery.

Symptoms of lymphedema in the affected arm include:

- Feeling of tightness
- Aching or pain
- Swelling in the hand and arm

- Weakness in arm

If you notice any of these symptoms, call your surgery team or your primary care doctor.

You can prevent and control lymphedema by protecting your arm after surgery:

- Don't let anyone draw blood or give you a shot in the arm on the side of your mastectomy
- Carry your handbag or heavy packages with the unaffected arm
- Use an electric shaver when shaving underarms
- Avoid sunburns and other burns to the affected arm
- Make sure that all blood pressure tests are performed on the unaffected arm
- Wear gloves when gardening and when using strong household cleaners
- Do your exercises regularly to improve drainage.
- Eat a well-balanced, low sodium diet
- Avoid extreme hot or cold temperatures on the affected arm
- Take proper care of your fingernails – avoid cutting cuticles
- Clean all cuts with soap and water and then apply anti-bacterial ointment and a sterile dressing
- Protect your fingers from needle pricks and sharp objects
- Avoid vigorous, repetitive movements such as scrubbing, pulling, and pushing with the affected arm

Work

You may return to non-physical work whenever you are comfortable. Discuss physical work restrictions with your doctor. Follow the guidelines given here to protect your arm.

Diet

It is important that you eat a healthy diet after your surgery. Do not become constipated. Drink plenty of liquids and high fiber foods (fruits, vegetables, whole grains). This will keep stools soft. Prune juice will also help to soften stools. If needed, you may take one ounce of Milk of Magnesia the evening after surgery to encourage a bowel movement.

Smoking

Do not smoke for six weeks after your operation. Smoking harms your lungs and heart. It also restricts the blood flow and oxygen supply. Smoking affects your body's ability to heal after your surgery and may increase your chances of infection or poor wound healing.

Expectations

You can expect some swelling, black and blue areas, and some numbness of your upper arm after your surgery.

Breast Exams Following Your Surgery

Do monthly breast checks after your surgery. Schedule your follow-up mammogram as directed by your doctor.

Contact the Minneapolis VAMC at one the numbers below if you have any signs of infection:

- Chills or a temperature of 100° or greater
- Increased amount of redness along the incision. Some amount of pinkish tissue or a small amount of bloody drainage is normal for a few days after surgery.
- Increased tenderness, swelling, or puffiness
- New openings along the incision line
- Yellowish, greenish, or foul smelling drainage
- Significant bleeding
- Increased pain after the first 36 hours

Minneapolis VAMC Contacts:

- Your coordinator at 612-467-3353
- Telephone Care at 612-467-2242, Monday through Friday between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.
- Urgent Care at 612-467-2771, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week

Call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345, seven days a week, 24 hours a day, or visit their web site at www.cancer.org for free information and help with:

- Special bras and prosthetics
- Reach for Recovery support groups
- Look Good/Feel Good support groups

Remember, this is an important time to take very good care of yourself.

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